



Merchant, P. (2016). Melodramatic Materials: *The Roof* and *The Man Next Door*. *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, 4(3), 337-354. https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.4.3.337_1

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1386/jicms.4.3.337_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.4.3.337_1)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Intellect at <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/jicms/2016/00000004/00000003/art00002>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Title: Melodramatic Materials: *The Roof* and *The Man Next Door*

Author: Paul Merchant, University of Cambridge

Abstract: Studies of the relationship between Italian Neorealism and Latin American cinema have often been limited to political analyses, or to superficial identification of formal similarities. This article aims to move beyond these approaches, proposing a comparative reading of Vittorio De Sica's *Il tetto/The Roof* (1956) and the Argentine film *El hombre de al lado/The Man Next Door* (Cohn and Duprat, 2009) which takes as its focus debates around ideas of modernity and affect, melodrama and the interior, and the understanding of architecture as media (in Beatriz Colomina's terms). Where De Sica's film offers architectural modernity and its periphery as a source of escape and hope, *The Man Next Door* uses a historical project of modernity, a Le Corbusier house, to develop a sceptical reflection on the possibility of community. *The Roof*, a critically neglected Neorealist text, thus allows a fresh perspective on (post)modernity and social conflict in contemporary Argentine film.

Keywords:

neorealism
melodrama
De Sica
modernism
architecture
Argentina
affect
history

Email address: pm437@cam.ac.uk

Postal address: Paul Merchant, St John's College, Cambridge, CB2 1TP, United Kingdom

In the final minutes of Vittorio De Sica's 1956 film *Il tetto/The Roof*, as the carabinieri (military police officers) arrive to evict the newly-married couple, Luisa and Natale, from the tiny house which they have been unable to finish building overnight, there is a striking moment in which the incomplete construction is shown to operate *as medium*, as a framing device not dissimilar to the camera itself. Luisa 'borrows' some children from neighbouring families so that, as the officers (and the spectator) look in through the window, they perceive

an image of a traditional, nuclear family, and might be less inclined to evict the occupants.¹ The ploy works, and Luisa and Natale are able to remain in their new home. This mediatic operation hints at how familial relations (or, more strictly, images of them) are tied up with the built environment. It also suggests, I argue, a way of approaching *The Roof* that assists a critical move beyond the usual connections drawn between Neorealism and Latin American cinema.

Debates in this field have often centred on the movement known as the New Latin American Cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, a loose grouping of politically motivated directors such as the Brazilian Glauber Rocha, the Cuban Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and the Argentine Fernando Birri (who studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome). Often at stake in these discussions has been the socio-political potential of Neorealist style (Hess 1993), alongside the postcolonial implications of its influence in Latin America. More recently, the so-called New Argentine Cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s has drawn comparisons with Neorealism for both thematic and formal reasons, although these have been accused of a lack of depth (Page 2009: 34). By proposing a comparative reading of *The Roof* and *El hombre de al lado/The Man Next Door*, an Argentine film directed by Mariano Cohn and Gastón Duprat (2009), I advocate a reformulation of political concerns, and point towards some illuminating links between De Sica's film and debates around modernity and affect in recent Latin American cinema.

The action of *The Man Next Door* takes place in the Le Corbusier-designed Casa Curutchet (finished in 1953) in La Plata. In the film, the house, which is the only building completed by Le Corbusier in South America, is home to Leonardo, a wealthy designer, and his family. Leonardo is outraged to discover, one morning, that his lower-class neighbour Víctor has knocked a hole through an adjoining wall to create a new window. The conflict generated by this alteration stems, I suggest, from Víctor's challenge to Leonardo's control

over the mediatic operations of the house, the ways in which the building functions as ‘a series of views choreographed by the visitor, the way a filmmaker effects the montage of a film’ (Colomina 1994: 312).

Both De Sica’s and Cohn and Duprat’s films thus present the spectator with a vision of life at the edge of modernist constructions. In the former case, the ramshackle dwelling that Luisa and Natale inhabit at the film’s end is within sight of Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl’s INA-Casa Viale Etiopia towers (on whose construction sites Natale works),² which have been described as ‘Neorealist architecture’. The aim of this article is not, however, simply to establish parallels between the social situations of the films’ protagonists. Nor is it limited to producing a stylistic comparison of postwar Italian Neorealism with the Neorealist tendencies identified in the New Argentine Cinema. There is more to be gained from a comparative reading: the particular intertwining of melodrama and the materials of modernity in De Sica’s film allows the function of (cinematic and architectural) history in *The Man Next Door* to become clearer. De Sica’s take on the affective implications of the rapid modernization of the Roman periphery can thus inform our reading of *The Man Next Door*, a film which deals with the legacies both of a European modernist vision from the 1950s, and of Argentina’s socio-economic crisis in 2001-2002.

The melodramatic real

The relationship of Italian Neorealism to melodrama has generated significant critical discussion. Angelo Restivo has written perceptively on the ‘retroactive, critical construction’ of Neorealism’s melodramatic ‘stain’, arguing that this terminology ignores the fact that, as an *aesthetic*, Neorealism could never simply record reality (2002: 22-23). Restivo, drawing

on the work of Peter Brooks (1995), suggests the following point of convergence between melodrama and Neorealism:

melodrama's hidden domain is *mute*, thus forcing the audience to view carefully the exteriorities that lead us toward this hidden realm. Similarly, neorealist aesthetics entails a kind of muteness, where character is not given through dialogue and self-examination but rather through gesture, positioning in space, and architecture. (Restivo 2002: 35)

It is this convergence which I would identify in *The Roof*, rather than seeing, as much early criticism of the film did, an exhaustion of the Neorealist formula.³ I am more interested in examining the operations of what Laura Podalsky terms 'neorealist sentimentality', and how it is adapted in the context of recent Argentine film. Podalsky argues that studies of the 'New Latin American Cinema' of the 1960s have overlooked 'the way in which Italian neorealism [...] offered models for constructing emotional appeals as a means to strengthen a film's denunciation of socioeconomic ills and structural inequalities' (Podalsky 2011: 34).

My concern here is, in part, to re-evaluate this approach using a more recent text, suggesting that in the case of *The Roof* and *The Man Next Door*, what is passed on is not so much the mode of emotional appeal itself as a focus on how it is rendered less predictable by material circumstances. In this sense, my analysis follows on from that put forward by Joanna Page, for whom the films of the New Argentine Cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s 'reconstruct neorealism under a postmodern, reflexive lens', incorporating Neorealist techniques as nostalgic citations, but accompanying that nostalgia with 'an equally postmodern scepticism concerning the social role of art and the possibility of political action

in the present' (Page 2009: 35). This scepticism is undoubtedly visible in *The Man Next Door*, though it does not obviously exhibit some of the most oft-cited hallmarks of the Neorealist style, such as a focus on poverty or the 'grainy, unfinished, "ad-hoc" nature' Page identifies in earlier Argentine productions (2009: 34).

Yet on a more significant level, I suggest, there is telling overlap between Cohn and Duprat's film and *The Roof*: what Page describes as a 'focus on surfaces, as a deliberate attempt to obscure as well as to reveal' (2009: 43). For this reason, while I agree with Marina Moguillansky's assertion that *The Man Next Door* represents a 'certain aesthetic and thematic turn' away from films like *Pizza, birra, faso*/*Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes* (Caetano and Stagnaro, 1998) and *Mundo grúa*/*Crane World* (Trapero, 1999), I would not necessarily suggest, as she implies, that this is a turn away from Neorealism (Moguillansky 2014: 153), but rather a sceptical reflection on it.

In the analysis that follows, I propose that in investigating precarious housing situations at the edge of projects of modernity (whether past or present), both *The Roof* and *The Man Next Door* rework and redistribute the traditional elements of cinematic melodrama. I will do so along two broad axes: one dealing with questions of space and image, the other with music and sound. Ultimately, in attempting to remedy the undue lack of critical attention towards these two texts, and to uncover their differences, I suggest a telling shift in attitudes towards the representation of history and of modernity (a term as slippery and polyvalent in the Argentine context as it is in the Italian).

Public emotion?

Scholarship on filmic melodrama is now so extensive as to be impossible properly to assess within this format. For my purposes here, perhaps the most provocative starting point is

Thomas Elsaesser's assertion that 'Melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small town setting' (Elsaesser 1992: 530). This reading has been challenged and nuanced in various ways, not least by Laura Mulvey, who draws attention to the mediation constantly in operation in family melodramas, especially with the advent of new technology:

The home, as a social place and mythologised space, has a special significance for the new medium [TV], and can thus draw attention to the way that oppositions of inside/outside have given order and pattern to the centrifugal/centripetal tensions in urban, industrialised, capitalist life. (Mulvey 1989: 64)

As we will see, the constitutive oppositions Mulvey identifies are not at all clear in the films to be analysed here. Indeed, the blurring of boundaries between private and public, inside and outside, which appears as a correlate of projects of modernity in these texts, challenges the unity of melodrama as a genre. Ben Singer has examined how modernity, when conceived of as 'a perceptual environment of unprecedented sensory complexity and intensity', complicates the generic stability of the term (Singer 2001: 2). In his view, a potential way out of this impasse is to posit melodrama as a *mode*, a set of techniques, rather than a genre (2001: 6). Singer proposes melodrama as a 'cluster concept', a shifting constellation of five elements: 'strong pathos; heightened emotionality; moral polarization; nonclassical narrative mechanics; and spectacular effects' (2001: 7). My contention here is that the spatial and sensory changes brought about by (architectural) modernity find an echo in a redistribution of these elements.

In *The Roof*, that redistribution can be seen as the emergence of melodrama from the home. Luisa and Natale, the newly-married protagonists, spend much of the film's running

time roaming the streets of Rome's periphery, after an argument forces their departure from Natale's overcrowded parental home. In fact, even before that they are constantly on the move, going to visit Luisa's parents in a provincial town and then returning to the capital by bus. As the vehicle passes through the *borgate*, the new peripheral settlements, a travelling shot taken from the front of the bus shows the apparently endless landscape of new housing blocks, and the spectator hears Luisa exclaim, 'Goodness, so many houses!' ⁴ This conflation of the domestic and stationary with the public and mobile might lead one to recall Giuliana Bruno's suggestion that through urban film, we realize that 'Home itself is made up of layers of passages that are voyages of habitation. It is not a site of static notion but a site of *transito*' (Bruno 2002: 103). The seemingly paradoxical category of 'public melodrama' that Bruno proposes in an earlier work on the films of Elvira Notari might also usefully be applied to *The Roof* (1993: 161-164).

The most interesting aspect of the way in which De Sica's film reworks melodrama is not, however, simply the connection of emotional extremes with motion and public space. The precarious, transitory dwelling of Luisa and Natale also reveals the inherently performative, and mediated, character of the extreme emotional situations associated with this mode, thereby contesting any simplistic understanding of cinematic realism. For instance, the tactics the couple uses to delay the officers of the law at the film's end rest on the performance of domestic conflict. Two of the builders are dispatched to stage a fight over a woman, which distract the policemen and buy the others some more time to finish construction. It might be said, then, that the housing shortage which leads the newly-weds to build their own dwelling also leads to a reflection on, and fragmentation of, the forms of domestic melodrama. This can be seen when an upset Luisa telephones Natale while he is at work on the building site, and he tells her: 'you shouldn't be making a scene like this'. It is as if the emotional extremes of melodrama sit uneasily in the new, modernist constructions.

In this context, I find it hard to share Podalsky's conviction that (in Latin America) melodrama can mediate the 'social transformations' of modernity, by easing 'the cognitive-affective transition of rural denizens to city life' (Podalsky 2011: 144). Indeed, in *The Roof* and still more markedly in *The Man Next Door*, it is the varying conceptions and material manifestations of modernity that mediate and transform the elements of melodrama. I argue in parallel that the linking of extremes of sensation with material boundaries articulates a move from *emotion* to *affect*. I am following here the Deleuzian model outlined by Brian Massumi, in whose view affect is that part of sensation that escapes 'capture' and definition as subjective emotion, allowing him to claim that 'Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them' (Massumi 2002: 35). I am however conscious of the plea for an attention to formal specificities in reading film for affect put forward by Eugenie Brinkema (2014: 36-37), and agree with her suggestion that Elsaesser's work on melodrama 'makes untenable any neat opposition between pre-affect film theory and pro-affect film theory' (2014: 43).

Before engaging more fully in that debate, however, it is worth dwelling on the particular function of modernist (or indeed 'Neorealist' architecture) in De Sica's film. Commenting on *The Roof*'s final shot, which shows the new house with the Viale Etiopia towers in the background, Bruno Reichlin suggests that the towers 'loom menacingly over Natale's miserable hovel', and that

This opposition is a metaphor and an illustration of the (ever more poignant) contrast between the countless individual miseries of the people and the statistical, anonymous existence of the mass-man, incarnated here by the unchanging grid that eliminates both differences and individuals. (Reichlin 2002: 119-120)

This view of modernist mass housing as oppressing the individual is borne out in shots of the construction site where Natale works, in which human figures are often dwarfed or obscured by machinery. John David Rhodes nonetheless adopts a different perspective, noting that in the film's final shot, the towers are *distant* in the background, so that 'the visual construction of this last scene is extremely picturesque, familiar, assimilable'; Rhodes furthermore points out that the makeshift house is in fact constructed from materials stolen from the Viale Etiopia building site (Rhodes 2007: 132). The opposition posed by Reichlin thus no longer seems so clear-cut: and indeed, despite his negative judgement of the effect of the towers, Reichlin goes as far as to say that De Sica's camera was able to 'make of these cement grids a Neorealist icon of [...] architecture' (Reichlin 2002: 118). The ambiguity that therefore clings to the term 'Neorealist' is hard to shake, as we will see. Both in the diegesis and in the technical aspects of filmmaking, then, it seems that in *The Roof* the elements of modernist architecture can be repurposed to provide the starting point for a new family story (and one, moreover, which takes place in the context of the 'tentative community' of settlers in the Fossati di Sant'Agnese (Curle 2000: 217).

The wrong window

This quiet note of optimism perhaps provides an opportune point at which to turn our attention to *The Man Next Door*. In Cohn and Duprat's film, there is no such happy resolution. The designer Leonardo puts sustained pressure on his neighbour Víctor to brick up, or at least drastically reduce the size of, the offending window, until the latter eventually concedes. In the film's final sequence, Víctor notices thieves entering Leonardo's home, and

confronts them, receiving a gunshot wound in the process. Entering the house shortly afterwards, Leonardo asks for a phone to call an ambulance, but in spite of the (conflicted) rapport built up with Víctor over the course of the film, chooses to do nothing and watch his neighbour die.

One way of reading this series of events would be to see them as logical consequences of the mode of living proposed by the Le Corbusier house. As noted above, Beatriz Colomina has made a case for understanding Le Corbusier's domestic architecture as fundamentally mediatic, dedicated to the production of images. In her view, a Le Corbusier house is

in the air. It has no front, no back, no side. The house can be in any place. The house, in a certain sense, is immaterial. That is, the house is not simply constructed as a material object from which certain views become possible.

(Colomina 2007: 262)

In a parallel observation, Colomina suggests that this reduces the 'public space' of the street and city to 'a limited set of images' which do not equal 'a unified whole' (2007: 263). It is important to point out that the Casa Curutchet, the house in La Plata depicted in the film, departs from this model in a significant way. It is unusual among Le Corbusier's few domestic constructions in that it adjoins existing buildings (Lapunzina 1997: 44): it is therefore not as detachable, as 'immaterial' as, for instance, the Villa Savoye in Poissy. In fact, one might think of the Casa Curutchet as appended to a previous model of modernity: the city of La Plata was built between 1882 and 1884 as the capital of Buenos Aires province, and is laid out according to a strictly geometric plan.

This contiguousness means that Víctor is able to disrupt the house's 'collection' of the outside, its illusion of immateriality, by opening his own viewpoint onto Leonardo's home.

Leonardo frames this development as a personal attack: he tells Víctor ‘you are wounding my intimacy, that of my family’, in reply to which Víctor asks, ‘but if they’re looking at you from all those [other] windows, how can one more piss you off?’ Leonardo claims that it is an issue of proximity, that he cannot allow someone to have a ‘shop window *inside* my house’ (my emphasis). I will suggest below that in fact class is at least as great a factor in the conflict generated here. Leonardo’s wilful confusion of inside and outside (the window is not strictly *inside* the Casa Curutchet) nonetheless reveals the extent to which his attitude to the world follows the terms outlined by Colomina: Víctor is challenging the conception of the house as ‘a camera pointed at nature. Detached from nature, [...] mobile’ (Colomina 1994: 312).

It might therefore be said that *The Man Next Door*, in filming the Casa Curutchet, repeats the house’s cinematic operations. Indeed, in the film’s opening sequence, as Leonardo searches for the source of the banging which has woken him, the camera takes the spectator on an ‘architectural promenade’ around the house, showcasing its spaces and features (such as the central ramp). The positioning of Cohn and Duprat’s camera, which rarely leaves the house, and indeed rarely leaves Leonardo’s side, provides an important point of contrast with De Sica’s film, and indicates clear differences in their attitudes towards projects of urban modernity.

In *The Man Next Door*, most of Leonardo’s confrontations with Víctor are shot over the designer’s right shoulder, so that this face and the prominent frame of his glasses act as the left-hand border of the image. One might argue, therefore, that it is not just the house which aims to ‘domesticate’ the exterior, to give it ‘a more human scale’ (to use one of Leonardo’s phrases), but the film itself. The irony here is that this ‘human scale’ seems not to apply to Víctor, at least as far as Leonardo is concerned. It is notable in this respect that in the one shot in the film where the camera takes a position aligned with the neighbour, as he talks to Leonardo and his wife at a party in their house, Víctor’s head appears mid-shot, obstructing

the spectators' view. By way of contrast, De Sica tends to frame his protagonists in medium shots, seemingly lending less importance to strategies of framing, and more to Luisa and Natale's urban surroundings, the physical circumstances of their plight. This 'oscillation' between a melodramatic subjective focus and a 'roaming "observational" camera that pulled the spectator away from the perspective of the characters to make visible the scale of social inequities' that Podalsky (2011: 35-36) finds both in De Sica and in the Brazilian filmmaker of the 1950s Nelson Pereira dos Santos, is nowhere to be seen in *The Man Next Door*.

There is another way of articulating this contrast. Where in *The Roof* conflict arises largely around disputes over the ownership and demarcation of space, in *The Man Next Door*, as we have seen, Leonardo's primary concern is control over the *image* of himself and his family. The conflicts that arise in De Sica's film are not, by and large, about who can see whom (although, as Howard Curle notes, Luisa is unsettled by the gaze of Natale's younger sister in the bedroom of his parental home (Curle 2000: 215)). Instead, there are arguments over the ownership and allotment of physical space. For instance, when the couple first attempt to find a place to build their new dwelling, in the Borghetto Prenestino,⁵ they are thwarted by a man who has marked out their proposed site with stakes, claims ownership of it, and attempts to sell it to them. The protest put forward by their companion, that 'this land belongs to everyone and to no one', has no effect. Yet it can still be said that the argument over the possibility of truly public space is present, and not entirely resolved, in the film.

In *The Man Next Door*, conversely, such disputes are given short shrift. Leonardo tells a woman who asks to visit his house that it would be like him walking into her home and opening her fridge, demonstrating a notable disregard for any notion of public interest. To this, she responds, witheringly, 'And can I stand on the pavement, or does that belong to you too?' Another comment by Leonardo suggests that, for him, the space of the outside world is merely one of economic transactions: when the doorbell goes during dinner, his reaction is to

ask his wife whether she ordered ice cream (in fact, it is Víctor at the door). One might well think here of the fragmentation and commercialization of urban public space in Argentina outlined by Beatriz Sarlo (1994, 2009). The appearance of Víctor challenges this conception of the public sphere. As Marina Moguillansky notes, the collision of these two characters from different classes can be read as indicative of a change in the social preoccupations of Argentine cinema: rather than the poverty caused by the socio-economic crisis of 2001-2002, it is now ‘social inequality’ which comes into focus, in the context of economic recovery (Moguillansky 2014: 163). In a more general vein, it might also be said that Víctor’s actions contest what Anthony Vidler identifies as the modernist project: ‘The destruction of the street, last trace of the “Balzacian mentality” so despised by Le Corbusier’, and its replacement by zoning (Vidler 1992: 63). With this in mind, Víctor’s persistence in addressing Leonardo as ‘neighbour’ acquires particular force.

In very simple terms, then, one could outline the contrast between the two films as a difference in emphasis between space and image. Yet that division is never clear in the cinema (to state the obvious), and it is worth remembering the sequence recounted at the start of this article: it is not as if De Sica is oblivious to the power of framing, to the mediatic potential of architecture. Moreover, Luisa demonstrates a desire for home ownership that is not altogether different to Leonardo’s, telling her husband that she wants their baby to be born in a house.

What marks out *The Man Next Door* is the extent to which it comments on, and echoes, the way in which Le Corbusier’s architecture in particular blurs the boundaries between space and image. Colomina uses Le Corbusier’s phrase ‘walls of light’ to draw attention to this confusion (1994: 6). In *The Man Next Door*, this is emphasized in the opening credits, which show, in split screen, either side of a wall as it is knocked through with a hammer. The fact that during the closing credits, the characters appear as cartoon-like

drawings on the wall reinforces the sense that the film is (self-consciously) repeating the operations of the house, flattening space into image. In the following section, the application of this notion of ‘flattening’ to music and sound will show the limits of the typical affective structures of melodrama.

Sonorous (de)construction: ‘What can you do with tears?’

To note the significance of music in the articulation of melodramatic narratives must be one of the most common of commonplaces.⁶ What is of particular interest in the two films under discussion here is how, at emotional extremes, extra-diegetic music and intra-diegetic sound are placed in a complex relationship, and how sonic elements of the films relate to the construction both of urban space and of subjectivity.

In *The Roof*, stirring extra-diegetic music punctuates the narrative in a relatively conventional manner, indicating moments of emotional intensity (such as the couple’s sudden departure from the parental home, the announcement of Luisa’s pregnancy, and their ultimate success in gaining their own house). What is of particular interest is the fact that these moments frequently accompany sequences showing movement or change within the urban environment. The most evocative example of this is the series of tracking shots that shows Natale and Luisa aboard a truck carrying construction materials, after their first attempt to build a new house has been thwarted by the arrival of the carabinieri. The music reaches a climax as the truck drives past the Colosseum: De Sica’s camera shows Luisa in tears, with the monument receding into the background. This conjunction suggests that the emotional structure of melodrama is closely related to the architectural development of Rome, and specifically to a movement from the old to the new. Yet this moment also represents a questioning of that structure: Natale doubts the value of Luisa’s crying, asking ‘What can you

do with tears?’ There are, it should be said, other moments in the film that reinforce this linking of affect with processes of construction: most prominently, the opening credits sequence, which is composed of a series of wide shots of building sites in action, and is accompanied by the same stirring string music.

These points of intense musical expression present the spectator with little or no intra-diegetic sound or dialogue (we might thus think back here to Restivo’s comments on the muteness of neorealism and melodrama). In fact, moments where *acousmatic* intra-diegetic sound, the noise of urban modernity from beyond the frame, is prominent might be said to form an alternative punctuation to the film’s narrative. When Luisa and Natale first move into the latter’s family home, the noise of aeroplanes and cars is inescapable (Luisa compares it unfavourably with the noise of the sea heard from her parents’ house). These sounds puncture what Patricia Pisters, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the refrain, calls the ‘sound walls’ of the home (in her view, ‘Every household is an aurally marked territory’ (Pisters 2003:189)). There is only one moment in the film where this kind of sound coincides with the extra-diegetic music, and the circumstances are telling. On their first evening at Natale’s family home, the couple go outside to avoid the gaze of Natale’s younger sister (mentioned above). As they embrace against the wall of the house, the spectator hears not only a segment of the music discussed above, but also the insistent noise of passing traffic.

What occurs here is a blurring of boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, whether physical or psychic. If we think of the extra-diegetic music as providing a point of contact with the characters’ interior experience, it is easy to see the elimination of ‘exterior’ noise as a correlate to that operation. By including the sounds of traffic in this sequence, De Sica suggests that the couple’s affective experience is not in fact separable from their physical situation, from the city itself. Indeed, following Massumi’s model, it is precisely this intrusion of the noise of the exterior which would operate a move from emotion to affect;

Massumi uses figures of resonance and interference to describe the functioning of intensity or affect (2002: 14). The protagonists' position against the wall of the house is also significant: their intimacy occurs on the boundary between spaces conceived of as private and public. In this context, it seems difficult fully to agree with Podalsky's claim that neorealism offered Latin American cinema 'a narrative template for knitting together "proper" emotional responses and moral certitude' (2011: 35). In that 'proper' suggests a clear demarcation of boundaries, privacy and ownership, it is not easily sustainable here.

The categories of 'objective' diegetic sound and 'subjective' extra-diegetic music are still harder to discern in *The Man Next Door*. Initially, the film appears to use music in a similar way to *The Roof*: half an hour into its running time, as Leonardo lies in bed after having begun to construct his web of invented pretexts to dissuade Víctor from going through with the window, the camera provides an extreme close up of his pensive face, and the spectator hears a slow, melancholic piano solo. This same music then accompanies a shot of Leonardo on the roof of his house, looking up at the apartment blocks surrounding his dwelling. A relationship thus begins to be traced between regret, the music, and the proximity of other (architectural) points of view: this is rendered more explicit in a later sequence, when Leonardo loses his temper at Víctor's mentally handicapped uncle Carlos, and the camera then provides a close up of his face looking back at his own house from Víctor's window (again accompanied by the piano music). Yet where in *The Roof* music is associated with the physical expression of emotion and with movement, here there is stasis and an impassive face. The audience's expectations of the emotional excess associated with family melodrama are thus denied: indeed, one is more likely to think here of Deleuze's 'reflective face', 'under the domination of the thought which is fixed or terrible, but immutable and without becoming', rather than the 'intensive face' he will associate with affective connections and movements (Deleuze 1986: 88-89).

This structure is disrupted towards the film's close, as the same music plays while Leonardo and his wife Ana are in the car. Ana tells her husband to turn the radio off, and when he fails to do so, does it herself. The apparently extra-diegetic music immediately stops. As a result, the boundaries of the diegesis, and the mode in which the spectator has been lead to view the film, suddenly reveal themselves to be very fragile. Any claim to 'objectivity' or 'realism' which might normally be assumed by diegetic sound is thus thrown into doubt. They also, in a more troubling way, reinforce the spectator's sense of identification with Leonardo. One might very well wonder, in this context, to what extent the film can provide an 'immanent critique' of the lack of empathy that, in Leonardo's case, seems to stem from the conjunction of the Casa Curutchet's emphasis on image creation with his bourgeois obsession with ownership.

This is not, however, the only conclusion which can be drawn from examining the ways in which sound and music reveal the instability of borders (whether of self, house, or diegesis). A different viewpoint is offered by a sequence in which Leonardo and a friend who has come over for dinner are listening to avant-garde music in the living room, and making rather pretentious, vapid comments about it. Leonardo's guest notes an out-of-time banging, which he takes to be coming from the sub-woofer, but which his host eventually realises is the sound of the works going on in his neighbour's house. His anger at this intrusion makes it clear that his apparent open-mindedness, at least partially linked to the apparent openness and transparency of the house, in fact rests upon a powerful sense of hierarchy.

The sounds of Víctor's refurbishment thus operate in a way similar to that envisioned by Beatriz Sarlo in her account of the audiovisual experiences of contemporary Buenos Aires. Sarlo proposes an artistic intervention consisting in taking music seen as characteristic of one neighbourhood and playing it in another, in order to move beyond 'iconic' representations of the city. This would, in her view, create a

Décalage between music (converted into ‘natural sounds’) and architectural motifs: seeing better when we hear what shouldn’t be heard, so that the sonorous event becomes a visual problem. Extraneous sounds break the ‘style’ attributed to a place and strip it, make it anew. (Sarlo 2009: 164)

Something of this dynamic is in evidence in Cohn and Duprat’s film: the sounds of construction from the neighbouring house disrupt the ‘style’ (or indeed Pister’s ‘sound walls’), the supposed values of ‘transparency’ and ‘human scale’ which Leonardo would associate with his dwelling. That style of living is also shown to be one of an almost complete lack of communication between Leonardo and his daughter Lola, who in the entire duration of the film does not say a word to her father, despite his repeated attempts to engage her. Indeed, the only words she does utter relate to Víctor. The first (an exclamation of ‘brilliant!’) is provoked by a finger-puppet show which the neighbour puts on for her in his new window, in a set made from cardboard and foodstuffs and accompanied by cheesy, upbeat music. Expression of emotion is thus provoked by an aesthetic which is very far removed from that of the Casa Curutchet: messy and unrefined. The only other moment when Lola speaks is after Víctor has been at the film’s end, when she asks if he is going to die.

It was noted above that Leonardo’s wife turns off the music which the spectator might previously have taken to be an extra-diegetic expression of Leonardo’s unease. If we remember that Restivo, following Brooks, suggests that the ‘hidden’ muteness of the melodramatic mode leads the spectator to focus on surface and exteriority, what is notable about Cohn and Duprat’s film is the extent to which that muteness is made explicit (this is also true, to a lesser extent, of *The Roof*: take the long, silent confrontation between Luisa and her father on the beach where he works as a fisherman). Leonardo’s family life seems to rest

on a suppression of emotional expression. In the one sequence where the spectator sees Leonardo cry, in his car, there is no diegetic sound, only the melancholic piano music (the shot is filmed from outside the vehicle, so the windscreen acts as a kind of sonic barrier). As a result, the shot's affective charge (Leonardo's regret at his actions, or perhaps his resentment of his wife's bullying behaviour?) is not easily reducible to a particular subjective emotion. The material environment thus in a sense *flattens* notions of interior experience (just as Lola's headphones block her father's access to her thoughts), in a way not dissimilar to the Casa Curutchet's flattening of exterior space into consumable images.

The shape of history

In attempting to conclude by reflecting on what a viewing of *The Roof* might prompt a spectator to see in *The Man Next Door*, or vice versa, perhaps the most useful point of comparison is the films' attitudes towards the representation of history. John Hess, in an essay comparing Italian Neorealism with the New Latin American cinema of the 1960s, argues that 'Neo-realism was unable to deal with history and therefore was unable to cope with the rapid changes in post-war Italian society' (Hess 1993: 109). It seems clear that his argument does not hold in relation to *The Roof*, which explicitly takes as its subject the rapid changes of postwar modernity in Rome. One might instead see De Sica's film as part of 'an articulated aesthetic and political project that embodied a *present historicity*' (my italics), a definition of Neorealism offered by Bruno (1993: 162). There is a definite sense in which the film presents itself as the movement of history (take the tracking shot away from the Colosseum mentioned above, for instance).

In *The Man Next Door*, conversely, a historical project of modernity takes on solid, obstructive form in the shape of the Casa Curutchet. This is rendered clear by a comment Leonardo makes to a man asking about the best place to install a panic button: Leonardo replies, jokingly, that they'd have to consult Le Corbusier. The past is present and concrete here, and as noted above, the conjunction of the modernist ideals of transparency and order with Leonardo's obsession with ownership and privacy prevents any solidarity with his neighbour, and flattens any depth of emotion. It is interesting here to note David Martin-Jones' criticism of Deleuze's model of the time-image, which suggests that the French philosopher's identification of the destruction of the Second World War as the point after which the time-image began to emerge (especially in Italian Neorealist films) reveals a Eurocentric perspective on the history of cinema (Martin-Jones 2011: 70). Referring to Deleuze's figure of the child seer, Martin-Jones writes that

In neorealism in particular, in the interval between perception and action there is a lack of informing past for the child seer to draw upon. The present stretches ahead of the child seer into an uncertain future. The past, for its part, is absent (2011: 77)

Martin-Jones contrasts this model with a 'virtual layer of the past' in recent Argentine melodrama. In the case of *The Man Next Door*, one might say that it is a *concrete* layer of the past, the house itself, which intervenes between perception and action.⁷ The conflict of the film is, in this sense, generated by the collision between a past vision of the future and the reality of the present (this is not to shift the blame for Leonardo's actions onto Le Corbusier). This presence of a past ideal of (European) modernity in *The Man Next Door* provides an opportunity for re-evaluating in what sense the film might be considered *postmodern*, beyond

the playfulness with the markers of cinematic realism discussed above. Indeed, quite what ‘modernity’ can be taken to mean in the Argentine (or broader Latin American) context has been the subject of much discussion: whether it should be dated before or after the European conquest, with independence movements in the 19th century, or whether the whole concept is too teleological and grand to be of any real analytical use (Miller 2007: 1). This uncertainty regarding the meanings and values of modernity can also be identified in debates in Italian cultural studies.⁸ Moreover, the perception that Italy had a rapid and uneven experience of modernization after the Second World War (Rhodes 2007: xvi-xviii) finds an echo not only in Argentina’s own experiences of the beginning of the twentieth century, but also in accounts which suggest that the effects of *postmodernity* (understood as the triumph of global capitalism in the 1990s) are experienced to an exaggerated extent due to the country’s peripheral position (Sarlo 1994: 7).

The Roof and *The Man Next Door* provide valuable perspectives on these parallels. The former film appears to inscribe itself within a project of architectural modernity: although it points out the physical and affective upheavals caused by rapid urban expansion, it ultimately offers an optimistic vision for the future. As has been shown, history in this film is movement and construction, the stretching (but not breaking) of melodramatic paradigms. In *The Man Next Door*, by contrast, history appears as an architectural model which generates stasis and inaction. If, in *The Roof*, modernist housing is either in construction or a distant, unattainable public good (comments are made about the insufficient quantity of new dwellings), in *The Man Next Door* it is a jealously guarded private ‘museum of the twentieth century’ (Colomina 2007: 262). In *The Roof*, it is ultimately a backdrop to conventional family life: by the film’s end Luisa is able to manipulate familial images. In *The Man Next Door*, conversely, it is the stage for those images’ undoing, the revelation of the silences and gaps which underlie them.

The lack of confidence shown in *The Man Next Door* towards the modernist house's ability to sustain familial or neighbourly interaction also reveals itself as a lack of confidence in the stability of the categories of melodrama, or indeed of realism, as the flattening of spatial and sonorous divisions discussed above indicates. A newspaper review of the film claimed that it ultimately 'agrees with those who don't trust their neighbours' (Cinelli 2010), and there is certainly ample reason here for believing that the New Argentine Cinema's politics of the image 'advances not toward commonality but toward singularity; not toward the transparency of collective political will but toward the opacity and contradictoriness of local and "originary worlds"' (Andermann 2013: 160). What, then, of the Neorealist legacy? The idea that it might be possible to combine melodramatic elements with the raising of social consciousness and the movement of history seems distant. It is telling that perhaps the closest Argentine correlate of *The Roof*, Mario Soffici's *Barrio gris*/'Grey Neighbourhood' (1954), is almost contemporaneous with De Sica's film. Paula Halperin writes that *Barrio gris*

carried an awareness of modernity, as it featured the same picturesque characters, melodrama, and classical narratives but with an appreciation of the present; it visually demonstrated the Peronist discourse of historical rupture. (Halperin 2012: 134-135)

In *The Man Next Door*, rather than a rupture with history there is a rupture with(in) society and the family (it is worth noting that even in earlier films such as *Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes* and *Crane World* there is little sense of historical movement). Should we then agree with Pasolini that Neorealism was always irredeemably 'subjective' and 'lyrical',⁹ including in transnational transmission? Halperin's observation that journalistic articles on

Neorealism in the anti-Peronist magazine *El hogar* in the 1940s and 50s focused ‘on the personalities and aesthetic choices of [...] acclaimed directors’ points in that direction (Halperin 2012: 132). In my view, however, *The Man Next Door* suggests rather that the intertwining of (modernist) architecture and affect that begins to be visible in *The Roof* is not ultimately containable within quasi-utopian, personalizing visions of modernity. That much is in fact hinted at by the ending of De Sica’s film: as Curle observes, Luisa and Natale have a new home, but they chase away the boy who has watched their construction, though he has no family to go to (Curle 2000: 218). In Cohn and Duprat’s film, this hint of something awry is expanded into scepticism towards the consequences of construction. In *The Roof*, the builder comes out on top, but the ‘man next door’ of the Argentine film pays a heavy price for his architectural tinkering.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank John David Rhodes for providing inspiration and invaluable feedback on the ideas developed in this article. The research was funded by a studentship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

References

Andermann, Jens (2013), ‘December’s Other Scene: New Argentine Cinema and the Politics of 2001’, in Jens Andermann and Álvaro Fernández Bravo (eds), *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema: Reality Effects*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 157-172.

Anderson, Lindsay (1956), ‘Panorama at Cannes’, *Sight and Sound* 26:1 (Summer), pp.16-21.

- Brinkema, Eugenie (2014), *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brooks, Peter (1995), *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Bruno, Giuliana (1993), *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- (2002), *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, New York: Verso.
- Caetano, Israel Adrián, and Stagnaro, Bruno (1998), *Pizza, birra, faso/Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes* (motion picture), Argentina, Palo y a la Bolsa Cine.
- Cinelli, Juan Pablo (2010), 'Una ventana demasiado indiscreta', *Página/12*, 2 September, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/5-19146-2010-09-02.html>. Accessed 30 July 2015.
- Colomina, Beatriz (1994), *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (2007), 'Vers une architecture médiatique', in Alexander von Vegesack et al. (eds), *Le Corbusier: the Art of Architecture*, Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, pp. 247-273.
- Cohn, Mariano, and Duprat, Gastón (2009), *El hombre de al lado/The Man Next Door* (motion picture), Argentina, Aleph Media/INCAA/Televisión Abierta.
- Curle, Howard (2000), 'A Home in the Ditch of Saint Agnes: De Sica's *The Roof*', in Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (eds), *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 210-219.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1986), *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Barbara Habberjam. London: Athlone Press.
- De Sica, Vittorio (1956), *Il tetto/The Roof* (motion picture), Italy, De Sica Produzione/Les Films Marceau/Titanus.
- Elsaesser, Thomas (1992), 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in Gerald Mast et al. (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4th ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 512-535.
- Halperin, Paula (2012), "'With an Incredible Realism that Beats the Best of the European Cinemas": The Making of *Barrio gris* and the Reception of Italian Neorealism in Argentina, 1947-1955, in Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar (eds), *Global Neorealism: the Transnational History of a Film Style*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 125-140.
- Hess, John (1992), 'Neo-Realism and New Latin American Cinema: *Bicycle Thieves* and *Blood of the Condor*', in John King et al. (eds), *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, London: BFI, pp. 104-118.

- Lapunzina, Alejandro (1997), *Le Corbusier's Maison Curutchet*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Martin-Jones, David (2011), *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, London: Continuum.
- Massumi, Brian (2002), *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Miller, Nicola (2007), 'Introduction: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Modernity in Latin America', in Nicola Miller and Stephen Hart (eds), *When Was Latin America Modern?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-17.
- Moguillansky, Marina (2014), 'Metáforas de la desigualdad social. Una lectura de *El hombre al lado*'/'Metaphors of social inequality. A reading of *The Man Next Door*', *A Contracorriente*, 11:2, Winter, pp. 145-165.
- Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Page, Joanna (2009), *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pisters, Patricia (2003), *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Podalsky, Laura (2011), *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reichlin, Bruno (2002), 'Figures of Neorealism in Italian Architecture (Part 2)', trans. Antony Shugaar, *Grey Room* 6, Winter, pp. 110-133.
- Restivo, Angelo (2002), *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rhodes, John David (2007), *Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sarlo, Beatriz (1994), *Escenas de la vida posmoderna/Scenes from Postmodern Life*, Buenos Aires: Ariel.
- (2009), *La ciudad vista: mercancías y cultura urbana*/'The city seen: merchandise and urban culture', Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno.
- Schnapp, Jeffrey T. (2012), *Modernitalia*, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Singer, Ben (2001), *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Soffici, Mario (1954), *Barrio gris*/'Grey neighbourhood' (motion picture), Argentina, Cinematográfica V.

Stack, Oswald (1969), *Pasolini on Pasolini*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Trapero, Pablo (1999), *Mundo grúa/Crane World* (motion picture), Argentina, INCAA/Lita Stantic Producciones/Matanza Cine.

Vidler, Anthony (1992), *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹ This moment is briefly discussed by Howard Curle in his illuminating chapter on *The Roof* (Curle 2000: 216).

² INA: Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni.

³ Lindsay Anderson claimed that De Sica and his screenwriter Cesare Zavattini had ‘reached a point in their works in which they are exploiting rather than exploring the effects of poverty’ (Anderson 1956: 18). Add page numbers

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Spanish or Italian are mine.

⁵ One of the best known, and largest, of the informal settlements of the period. *Borghetto* designates its extra-legal nature, as opposed to the *borgate*, some of which were officially sanctioned.

⁶ See, for instance, Elsaesser 1992: 519-520.

⁷ It might nonetheless be said that the film is haunted by a ‘virtual’ past project of modernity in the form of Le Corbusier’s unrealized scheme for remodelling Buenos Aires, the ‘Plan Directeur’ (Lapunzina 1997: 27-28).

⁸ For example in *Modernitalia* (Schnapp 2012).

⁹ Rhodes (2007: 58), citing Pasolini in Stack (1969: 42).